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The CIA's saddest 'secrets'

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I have just been reading with fascination and shock a new book just out on the history of the CIA. It is called "The Man Who Kept The Secrets," meaing Richard Helms, who was head of the agency from 1966 to 1973, but that is a misnomer. It is in fact the story of the CIA from its origins in the OSS (Office of Strategic Services) in World War II down to the present. It is the first broad account I have yet seen of the whole story. It is objective, neither for nor against. It is not an "exposure" of alleged misdeeds, nor is it a "gee whiz, ain't they wonderful" story about spies. It just tells the story.

The shock to me in reading the story is to find out how many failures there were. We all know about the Bay of Pigs. I did not know until reading this book that there was also an operation back during the "cold war" era when the CIA thought it was in touch with a Polish underground organization. But there was no real Polish underground. Those were Soviet agents playing a successful cat and mouse game with Allen Dulles's overeager neophytes in Washington.

Then there was an air-drop operation to Ukrainian nationalists holding out in the Carpathians for a short time after World War II was over. Nothing came of it. And time and time again teams of agents equipped with radio transmitters were air dropped into China. Sooner or later they all disappeared, some of them after being abandoned.

Many critics of the CIA have fastened on such things as domestic spying on American citizens and use of drugs on unsuspecting persons during experiments. Such improprieties have long since, supposedly, been stopped. I trust they have been. But such positive misdeeds do not shock me in the way that the discovery of failures does. I had long supposed that on balance the CIA had more successes than failures. It had its successes, although two of its earliest successes seem to have gone sour. The first spectacular success was the overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran in 1953 and the return to power of the Shah. The sequel is painful. The second success was the overthrow of the left-leaning regime in Guatemala in 1954. Col. Carlos Castillo-Armas was set up by clandestine US guns. Guatemala still lives in a state of political instability, perhaps more precarious now than ever.

Against those two successes, both apparently of doubtful long-term value to the United States, must be set up a long series of spectacular failures running from the Bay of Pigs disaster to the enormous investment in operations connected with the Vietnam war. They included use of mountain tribesmen in Laos and Vietnam who were recruited, used, and eventually, for the most part, used up. There are not many survivors.

Worst of all, to my mind, is the account of the effort of specialists and experts in the CIA to get the Pentagon and the White House to accept realistic figures about enemy military strength in Vietnam. Obviously, people down at the lower levels of the CIA knew the score with remarkable accuracy. But it took the shock of the Tet offensive to make it possible for Mr. Helms at the top of the CIA to be able to tell the White House what it did not want to hear.

Until Tet, Pentagon and White House operated on the assumption of a maximum enemy troop strength of 270,000. The CIA experts had long before reached the conclusion that 500,000 was a more realistic figure. The experts, and Mr. Helms, tried to get the figures changed. They could not, until Tet shook the White House to its foundations. Lyndon Johnson finally faced reality, and soon thereafter announced he would not run for reelection.

There is not much use in a big and expensive intelligence operation in Washington if the White House will not listen to what the experts have to tell them about enemy strength, or weakness.

The blame is not so much with the CIA itself as with those who insisted on trying to misuse it for domestic political ends. Most of the CIA's failures resulted from pressure from the White House to do things which were beyond its capacity, or attempted against its better judgment. The truly great successes seem to have been more or less accidental. One voluntary Soviet defector or supplier of information from within the Kremlin is worth a thousand attempts at subversion from the outside.

The most useful source of information the CIA ever had in Moscow was a volunteer, Oleg Penkovsky. But no amount of money or experts in Washington can manufacture an Oleg Penkovsky. They just happen.

The main conclusion I draw from the book is that President Carter was abundantly correct in telling Admiral Stansfield Turner to rebuild the CIA. It also needs to be protected from pressures on it from the outside which have caused it to do a lot of foolish things.